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SUBJECT: RENEWED VIOLENCE IN NANDIGRAM INDICATES A POLITICAL BATTLE
FOR RURAL VOTERS

REF: KOLKATA 000104, KOLKATA 000088

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two people were killed and five injured in Nandigram on April 29 in a recurrence of violence between supporters of the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM) and the Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee ("Committee to Resist Displacement from Land") (BUPC). While the fighting in Nandigram earlier this year was over land acquisition for a proposed petrochemical hub, the latest violence reflects a growing struggle between the CPM and Trinamul Congress (TMC)-backed BUPC over turf and political control. The CPM is experiencing cracks within its Left Front with growing criticism coming from its smaller coalition partners who have been traditional CPM allies. For the first time in decades, the CPM may be facing a real challenge to its dominance in some parts of West Bengal. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Despite West Bengal government's recent decision not to locate a 14,000 acre chemical hub in Nandigram -- a small rural neighborhood in East Midnapur district, about 100 miles southwest of Kolkata -- the area remains a flashpoint for violence. Two persons were killed when fighting broke out between supporters of the CPM and BUPC. During the battle, there was liberal use of improvised bombs, muskets and small arms. Starting in the early hours of April 29, the fighting lasted nearly two days, resulting in damage to houses and crops as well.

13. (SBU) Media reports indicated that fighting started when about 150 armed CPM supporters made an effort to enter Nandigram on April 29. CPM leaders claimed that these supporters were former residents of Nandigram who have been living in makeshift camps since early January after being driven out of their homes by BUPC activists. The BUPC and TMC leaders, however, claimed the men were not residents of Nandigram but thugs hired by local CPM leaders. A senior political leader from the Congress party told post on his return from Nandigram that the police stood by as the CPM and BUPC groups attacked each other and ransacked close to 200 houses in the area.

14. (U) On April 30 in Kolkata, TMC supporters protested and blocked important city streets, tying up traffic. A Post contact said that the TMC is not in a hurry to begin any political dialog in Nandigram, content to put itself forward as the face of resistance to CPM rule. He also said that small arms were pouring into Nandigram from all over West Bengal and also from neighboring Bihar and Jharkhand.

15. (SBU) Although Senior Left Front partners of the CPM dismiss the idea of their forming a separate Left Front, a section of the CPM leadership has begun to fear, justifiably, the

possibility of losing their rural agrarian support base. In Nandigram, the BUPC itself consists partly of former CPM supporters who defected and are now taking the lead with opposition supporters in fighting the CPM. The opposition TMC hopes to build a front of all opposition forces comprised of the BUPC, Muslim organizations and smaller parties in the months to come. However, until the TMC formally severs ties with the rightist BJP and develops an effective organizational network statewide, the possibility of its weaning away former Left supporters, including Muslims, is remote.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Nandigram began in January as fight by local villagers to keep their land in the face of GOWB plans for a mega-chemical hub. However, it is quickly transforming into a battle for political power. The CPM for the first time in almost three decades faces a serious challenge to its authority in rural West Bengal. The repercussions from Nandigram are now being felt within the CPM's Left Front coalition as the smaller Left parties, like the Forward Bloc, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and others are criticizing the CPM and Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. Even among the CPM leadership, tensions appear to be growing with some Ministers publicly unhappy with the direction of Bhattacharjee's industrial policy. Nandigram has catalyzed a serious political crisis for the CPM and is likely to fester, generating further violence, with the possibility of other areas slated for industrial development becoming new flashpoints.

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